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# Martha Carey Thomas

1857-1935, BALTIMORE COUNTY

*One thing I am determined on is that by the time I die my brain shall weigh as much as any man's if study and learning can make it so...*

—AN ENTRY FROM M. CAREY THOMAS'S CHILDHOOD DIARY WRITTEN AFTER HEARING THAT WOMEN'S BRAINS WERE SMALLER THAN MEN'S, WHICH PROVED WOMEN INFERIOR

A young M. Carey Thomas developed a love for reading while convalescing from burns after a nearly fatal kitchen fire. She had been born in a time when a patriarchal society deemed that "all that a woman needs to know is how to read the New Testament, and how to spin and weave clothing for her family" (Copinger 10). Higher education for women was looked upon with suspicion, and both sexes wondered whether too much learning would interfere with a woman's matrimonial chances. "After having read the Bible," said Thomas, "including St. Paul's epistles with their anti-feminist strictures, and after hearing interpretations verifying that women were inferior to men, I was disheartened." One day she prayed, begging God that if "it was true that because I was a girl I could not successfully master Greek and go to college and understand things, to kill me at once, as I could not bear to live" (Copinger 10).

By 1872, Thomas had persuaded her father to allow her to attend a newly opened school for girls in New York. Later, she would attend and graduate from Cornell University, after



COURTESY OF BRYN MAWR SCHOOL ARCHIVES. FRZD HOLLYER.  
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which she applied to study) for a master's degree at all-male Johns Hopkins University. Although she was prohibited from attending classes at Hopkins or earning a degree, she was privately tutored in Greek. In 1879, her search for quality education took her to Europe, where she found no more encouragement than in her native land. She was denied degrees because of her gender until the University of Zurich admitted her and awarded the Ph.D., *summa cum laude*. During the grueling examination process before the entire philosophical faculty, Thomas stood up wearing a full evening dress with a long train and white gloves, apparently daring her examiners to question her femininity (Copinger 10).

While finishing her studies in Europe, Thomas heard of a proposed women's college in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania and applied for its presidency. A man was chosen instead, but Thomas was appointed college dean and the first professor of English. Later she inaugurated the first graduate school to be maintained by a women's college. She also visited noted women's colleges throughout the country—Smith, Vassar, Wellesley, and Radcliffe, among others—and prepared the plans that would make Bryn Mawr one of the outstanding women's colleges in the country. By 1894, Thomas was the college's president (Wilson).

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working women, or stay-at-home mothers, were always foremost  
in Thomas's mind.*

Prior to assuming the presidency, Thomas had long been aware of the shortage of secondary schools with standards high enough to prepare girls for the college. Her longtime Baltimore friends and colleagues agreed and together worked to rectify the situation. Their plan culminated in the 1885 founding of Baltimore's Bryn Mawr School, where Thomas brought in exceptional faculty and made sure laboratories and libraries were well stocked. Thereafter, Thomas oversaw Bryn Mawr's continued growth. Thomas and the same women who founded Bryn Mawr would later turn their attention to Johns Hopkins, raising a significant endowment for its new medical school under the condition that women be admitted.

The rights of women, be they college women, working women, or stay-at-home mothers, were always foremost in Thomas's mind. By 1915, Thomas had founded Bryn Mawr's Graduate School of Social Economy and Social Research, the first in the country, and by 1920, she had established the Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. She also worked ceaselessly for women's suffrage and was the first president of any women's college to advocate that women be permitted to vote as a step toward social and financial equality. Now living with her longtime friend, heiress Mary Garrett, Thomas, with Garrett's help, raised tens of thousands of dollars to meet the expenses of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and rallied college women to the cause. In addition, she made speeches for the cause and was one of the younger women who gathered around Susan B. Anthony in the tedious, but ultimately victorious, battle for women's rights and recognition (Bryn Mawr School). All in all, Thomas served thirty-seven years as a college administrator.

Before M. Carey Thomas died, she had advanced the rights of women in academia, become a compelling advocate for women's suffrage, and helped create Bryn Mawr College, an institution, from the beginning, in the first rank of American colleges. She had journeyed far from a time and place that denied women a college education. M. Carey Thomas, champion of a woman's right to learn, knew she had overcome old fears, fears long ago confided to her diary—fears conquered, in large part, by her own work for women. #

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# WOMEN

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OF

# ACHIEVEMENT

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# IN MARYLAND

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# HISTORY

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